
HUME ON CAUSATION

(Part 1 of 2)

Text source:

*Enquiry Concerning Human
Understanding*, section 7 part 1

WHENCE THE IDEA OF CAUSAL POWER?

Q: Where does our idea of “*power, force, energy or necessary connexion*” come from? (ECHU 7.3)

- Following Locke, Hume assumes an empiricist framework: every idea is ultimately derived from experience – in his words, “*ideas are nothing but copies of impressions*”. (ECHU 7.4; and recall ECHU 2.9)
 - So what experience (“*impressions*”) do we get our idea of causal power from? (ECHU 7.4, 7.5)
-

LIKE LOCKE AND BERKELEY, HUME HOLDS THAT ANY IDEA WE *GENUINELY* HAVE IS TRACEABLE TO EXPERIENCE

- “When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term, is employed without meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality.” Hume, EHU 2.9
-

THREE TRADITIONAL ANSWERS

We get our idea of causal power from the experience of observing...

(1) The action of external bodies on each other, or

(2) The mind's ability to move the body at will, or

(3) The mind's ability to conjure up certain ideas at will.

HUME WILL REJECT ALL THREE TRADITIONAL ANSWERS

- Hume holds that experience in each of these three cases only shows us that certain **regularities** happen in fact to hold.
 - E.g. Whenever I observe a billiard ball struck with sufficient force, I then next observe that same ball in motion.
 - But we only observe the **constant conjunction** or **regularities** of these event-pairs – we never actually observe any *causal power* by which the former causes the latter.
 - “[W]e only learn by experience the frequent CONJUNCTION of objects, without being ever able to comprehend any thing like the CONNEXION between them.” (ECHU 7.21. See also the excellent summary at 7.26.)
-

WE DON'T EXPERIENCE CAUSAL POWER IN EXTERNAL OBJECTS

(1) We don't get our idea of causal power from observation of the behavior of external physical objects (at least not "in single instances of their operation") (ECHU 7.6-7.8).

- We don't experience causal power when we observe the actions of external objects (at least in single cases).
 - *"We are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other." ECHU 7.6*
-

WE DON'T EXPERIENCE CAUSAL POWER IN EXTERNAL OBJECTS (*cont.*)

Supporting Arguments:

- When we see an object (TH: *event* might be better?) for the first time, we can never foretell what will follow from it. ECHU 7.7
 - For all logic tells us, any event could be followed by any other event. *Any* succession of events is logically conceivable. ECHU 7.8
-

WE DON'T EXPERIENCE CAUSAL POWER WHEN THE MIND MOVES THE BODY

(2) We don't get our idea of causal power from observation (via internal reflection) of the operation of the mind in moving the body

(ECHU 7.9-7.15).

- We don't experience causal power when we introspect on the mind's own ability to produce action.
 - *"That [the limbs] motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events; but the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and unconceivable."*
(ECHU 7.15)
-

WE DON'T EXPERIENCE CAUSAL POWER WHEN THE MIND MOVES THE BODY(*cont.*)

Supporting Arguments

- The mind's ability to move matter is altogether mysterious. But it wouldn't be if we were acquainted with the causal power at work. ECHU 7.11
 - The mind can only move some of our bodily parts, but we can't give a reason why it can move such-and-such parts and not others. And we would be able to give this reason if we were acquainted with the causal power at work here. ECHU 7.12-7.13
 - We don't experience the way in which this power operates, since (e.g.) we can be surprised to find out that the mind moves the finger by first sending signals to the spinal column etc... ECHU 7.14
-

WE DON'T EXPERIENCE CAUSAL POWER WHEN THE MIND CONJURES UP IDEAS

(3) We don't get our idea of causal power from observation (via internal reflection) the operation of the mind in conjuring up ideas at will. ECHU 7.16-7.20

- *“I believe that the same arguments will prove, that even this command of the will gives us no real idea of force or energy.” ECHU 7.16*
-

WE DON'T EXPERIENCE CAUSAL POWER WHEN THE MIND CONJURES UP IDEAS (*cont.*)

Supporting Arguments:

- We don't understand the nature of the mind and its ideas, much less how the one produces the other. ECHU 7.17
 - The mind can only control certain ideas, but we can't give a reason why it can control such-and-such ideas and not others. And we would be able to give this reason if we were acquainted with the causal power at work here. ECHU 7.18
 - The mind's ability to control its ideas varies (e.g. with sickness, with the time of day etc...). We don't understand why this is, but we would if we were acquainted with the causal power at work.
-

THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMEAN POINT (AT WORK IN ALL 3 ANSWERS)

- Given the traditional understanding of causal power, we should be able to see what *must* happen given the initial conditions. We ought to be able to see and predict how causal processes *must* fall out.
 - If we understood the causal power, we should be able to see what *has to* follow as an effect.
 - The '*must*' and '*has to*' here capture the idea that we are talking about ***causal necessities***.
-

THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMEAN POINT

(Continued)

- But Hume claims that we *never* observe *any* such causal necessity, either in (1) observing external objects, or in (2) observing the mind's power to control the body, or in (3) observing the mind's power to control its ideas.
- All we ever witness are mere **constant conjunctions** or **regularities** of A-type events with B-type events, never any **causal necessity**.

Why? Well ...

THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMEAN POINT

(Continued)

- **Why? Well...**

- After all, (i) its **logically possible** that any event could be followed by any event.
- And (ii) how could we ever be entitled to make a **universal** judgment (implicit in the notion of there being a *necessity* here – if we saw a genuine necessity we'd have to be able to say *in any relevantly similar case*, the same thing would have to happen), given that we've only ever experienced **singular** cases of A-event-and-B-event pairs, or **finite series** of such singular event pairs?

[We saw these same points in Hume's discussion of induction.]

- **So we have no idea of causal power that lives up to the *traditional* idea of a causal necessity.**
-